

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2020

3rd in Advent, you are invited to have a single candle to light during the service

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.  
God is ever present, around us and within us,  
though separate let us worship together in God.

**Suggested Hymn**          Make way, make way for Christ the King

[Watch here](#)

### **Prayer**

Eternal God, alpha and omega,  
You are the beginning and you are the end.  
In you all things have their making,  
without you there is nothing.  
You are beyond imagination,  
Beyond comprehension,  
And yet you love us,  
Love us like the best friend we could imagine,  
For you are always there,  
At the beginning and at the end.  
Forgive us when we forget, and try to go it alone.  
Forgive us when we ignore your love and hurt others.  
Forgive us our pride, our arrogance and our prejudice,  
Our failure to put you where you belong,  
At the beginning and end of each and every day,  
The beginning and end of every moment.  
Eternal God your forgiveness is gracious and unconditional  
and in it we are blessed with a new beginning.  
Today and every day we will seek to follow Christ  
and the path that leads to freedom.  
The path that begins with love and ends in peace,  
the peace of the Kingdom of God.  
We journey together in your love and say together the words of Jesus -  
Our father ....

**Advent Candle** (You are invited to light a single candle at the appropriate moment)

### **Readings**

Based on Genesis 1:26 – 31

Then humanity was created from the source of all being, a part of all creation. Within their being humanity was given responsibility for the care and nurture of all life, the fish in the seas, the birds in the air, and all land life. On the planet, the source of all being created plants and trees to feed the people and all life on earth. It was good, it was amazing, and the balance was perfect.

Luke 2: 8- 20

In the region of Bethlehem there were shepherds living in the fields caring for the sheep. It was night and the shepherds were gathered with the flock when suddenly an angel appeared in the sky, a bright light resonating with sound which filled the sky. The shepherds were afraid, but they heard a voice which said, "Do not be afraid we have come to bring you a message of joy for all people. Tonight, a child is born, a boy, who will bring good news to your people, he will proclaim a new way of living that will release you from all that binds you. You will find the child in a manger, in a stable, go and greet him."

The shepherds were silent as the light dimmed in the sky and then they turned to each other and knew in their hearts that they must go down into Bethlehem and find this child. They hurried excitedly into the town and found the stable where the child lay, and they told everyone what had happened up in the fields and the message the angel had given. Everyone who heard was amazed but Mary sat still, letting the words fill her heart with love and a little dread. The shepherds returned to their fields, singing and rejoicing, and praising God.

In all weathers farmers tend their animals, feeding and caring for them. They work long, hard hours to produce the food on which we all rely. This year has been harder, and we have realised how much we depend on others for the food we need to live.

### **Prayer**

We pray for the farmers who tend their animals, giving thanks for their work on which we are so dependant. We think of the long hours they work, in the day and in the night, may we value their work by paying a fair price for their goods. We pray for all those in the food industry as they continue to link producer and customer, and we pray for just trading so that all receive a fair reward for time and effort.

### **Light Candle**

We light this candle for farmers and food producers around the world.

**Sing** (*tune St Bees, listen [here](#)*)

In the darkness comes a light,  
light of hope for all to see.

Hold the light within your heart  
pray for all humanity.

### **Intro**

December is often a fine balance between preparation and celebration. When there is an imbalance, as I fear there often is, we lose advent in the celebration of Christmas or become so tired preparing that we diminish the celebration of Christmas. In a normal year, the frenzy of juggling preparations is all too obvious with shops heaving, fridges heaving, cupboards heaving all to celebrate for one day the birth of child whose message to the world was and is simplicity. There are those who love shopping, love giving and most of us love eating but are we really loving one another, loving our neighbour? This year has been so different that Christmas has become a beacon of light, and Christmas lights appeared earlier as people tried to kindle some cheer in their lives. It is too early to say how Christmas will be celebrated and though we all long to get together, and the government seems set to allow some gathering, many of us have made the decision to keep things simple this year to avoid any more unnecessary loss of life. This has perhaps given more time to reflect on Advent and learn something from the depths of the Christmas stories. So, this morning we are going to reflect on what we can learn from Mary and John, who celebrated and prepared in their special way.

We begin by listening to Mary's story.

**Reading**                      1 Luke: 26 – 56

### **Reflection**

Mary, if she was preparing for anything, was preparing for her new life with Joseph. They were betrothed and one day soon they would marry, they would move into the family home and then they would have children. Into this comes an angel with a message, the order of things is going to change. Now there are plenty of young women who find their future plans changed by an unexpected pregnancy but usually although they may say 'I don't know how it happened!', they can look back to a probable cause. Mary, we are told had no probable cause, there was no 'earthly' way that Mary could be pregnant, and in those days such occurrences could have dire consequences. So why is Mary celebrating? To begin to understand we need a context.

Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream; it was the ancient dream of Israel. The dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true, and all nations would be blessed through the Abraham's family as God had promised. It was a dream that had been kept alive for hundreds of years by diligent study and learning of the Hebrew Scriptures. Almost every word of the Magnificat, Mary's hymn of celebration, is a biblical quotation from scriptures Mary would have learnt as a child. I am sure many of you will remember learning the text of the week for Sunday School but how many can you recall now, enough to put together in a hymn? I know I cannot! Much of Mary's song echoes Hannah's story from 1 Samuel 2 which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God would do through him. The angel has said that God will do amazing things through the child Mary carries and it reminds her of this story she heard in childhood and of the promise she carries in her heart, God's promise. Mary's celebration is a celebration of God for God is the ultimate reason to celebrate.

God is our reason to celebrate. There are divided opinions about the literal belief in the Virgin Birth, for some it is important that they can trust in the 'facts' of Scripture whilst for others the idea of a Virgin Birth is a step too far and taking it literally becomes an obstacle to belief. For many of us, Luke the storyteller has created a storyline, relevant to his time, which forms the base from which we explore the possibilities of Christmas and faith, but which is no more than a catalyst to celebrating God. Thomas Merton, exploring what he means by seeking his true self in contemplative prayer, refers to a 'point vierge' or virgin point in which we find ourselves fully aware of the presence of God uncluttered by illusion, myth or doctrine. Richard Rohr suggests that it is when control is taken from us that we are most likely to find our virgin point. The story of the virgin birth is important as it reveals an aspect of love, God's love, but what is more important is our response to God's love. We read of Mary's response and Richard Rohr invites us to compare that to the response of Zechariah when he is visited by an angel. Where Mary's response is 'How can this be?', Zechariah asks 'How will I know that this is so?' He suggests that Zechariah is seeking knowledge and information whilst Mary seeks wisdom.

Knowledge and information are factors in control whilst trust is an aspect of wisdom. When we always seek control, we fail to grasp the deeper wisdom in life, we miss our virgin point and never truly find ourselves. When we allow ourselves to journey in mystery, to let go of certainty and be open to wonder we find ourselves deeper in God's love. This year our grasp on control has been loosened by Covid 19 and this Advent offers us a new opportunity to seek wisdom rather than knowledge and information, to open ourselves to the wonder of God.

**Suggested Hymn**      The Angel Gabriel to Mary came  
[Listen here](#)

Zechariah's son was John the Baptist and it to his story that we now turn.

Reading                      John 1: 6-8 & 19-28

#### Reflection 2

John was the great preparer and he earned himself quite a reputation, enough to bring out the scribes and prophets to investigate. You can almost imagine Jeremy Paxman at the end of the microphone; who are you, are you the messiah? Well if you are not the messiah are you Elijah? No! Well then, the great prophet, come on you must know who you are? Despite the interrogation John was adamant he was none of these people, he had one task, to prepare the way for the messiah. Did he know who the messiah would be? I have often wondered what he thought when Jesus, his younger cousin, came forward as the one he prepared for. Yes, there were family stories about Jesus' birth but then John himself had been little short of a miracle and there were strange stories surrounding events around his father. Yes, the two boys grew up together, but did Jesus do anything in that time to cause John to suspect? There is no evidence from that time so we cannot know. The whole story is intertwined in legend and dream.

John's own path was predicted by an angel and celebrated by his father at his birth. We are told a little more about John in Matthew's gospel, he wore sackcloth and ate honey and locusts which all seems a bit extreme but it was Matthew's way of helping people to see John as a prophet. His way of life mirrored the stories of the prophets, so it is little wonder that the Pharisees and Sadducees were suspicious of his motives.

Now the question for us is, are we a Mary or a John, or are we a bit of both? In our celebration of God have we built in room to prepare not just ourselves but others. John proclaimed the Messiah, we are called to tell our story, our understanding of God and the place of God within our lives and within the world. Perhaps we need to prepare ourselves to tell the story not simply in our actions, our love of others, but also creatively in conversations and songs, and stories. In the musical Godspell, John's proclamation brought people from all over to immerse themselves in the joy of God are we ready to celebrate?

**Suggested Hymn**      Prepare the Way (Godspell)

[Watch here](#)

**Psalm 126** (Psalms for a Quantum World)

When oneness happens  
we glimpse a reality  
of which we have only dreamed.  
We are shocked, surprised,  
momentarily taken aback.  
Then like a flutter in our hearts  
a wave of deep joy moves outwards  
and realisation erupts in laughter and love.

This oneness is good,  
amazing,  
and in the power of oneness  
we hear God speak and see God act.

Let us  
open our ears to hear;  
open our eyes to see;  
open our hearts to yearn  
and respond in love to all people,  
that oneness may become a reality again,  
and in the power of oneness  
all may grow in love,  
joy replace sorrow,  
and tears of laughter water the seeds of peace.

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### **Prayers**

Loving God we gather in your presence, a symbol of church in community, and we lift to you the world in which we live. It is a world in crisis, we have allowed our greed to plunder the earth destroying forests and oceans and killing species, and our actions have created the opportunity for a pandemic which is killing our own species around the world. We pray that this pandemic will be humanity's opportunity to find a still point and that we will encourage one another to share more generously and halt the destruction of our world.

**Eternal God may we prepare ourselves to proclaim the celebration of your love.**

As we think of this pandemic, we think of all who are in hospital at this time, the victims of Covid and those who are receiving treatment for other conditions. We pray for those who are caring for them and we pray for all who, this week, have received the Covid vaccine and are preparing to move into a

new way of life. We think of those who are preparing for a birth, may the gift of new life bring joy into the hearts of families. We think of those who have been surprised by an unexpected pregnancy and pray that they will find the path through the chaos and find peace in their decision.

**Eternal God may we prepare ourselves to proclaim the celebration of your love.**

Loving God in the bustle of preparations may we find a still space to sit in your presence and discover our own virgin point in the pureness of your love. We pray for all those who find themselves in distress, confused in their own minds and struggling to see light in the darkness. May they find a still point in which they sense your presence with them and the light that offers hope even in the darkness.

**Eternal God may we prepare ourselves to proclaim the celebration of your love.**

This year we have discovered we are not in control and for many this has led to frustration and fear. Loving God through the message of Jesus we know that we are one and what we do affects others, none of us are truly in control. May we learn to live in oneness recognising our shared responsibilities and our interdependence. We pray for all who will find it impossible to celebrate this Christmas, especially those whose lives are controlled by others and who live in fear, victims of abuse of so many kinds. We pray that your love will reach them through the support of organisations with the expertise to help, and that we will be more aware of the part we can play in changing the world.

**Eternal God may we prepare ourselves to proclaim the celebration of your love.**

Amid strangeness, Mary and Joseph found their still point in a stable and from the depth of creation a new light shone. Loving God in the midst of our strangeness this Christmas may we find our comfort through the knowledge of your presence with us, and may we draw strength from the Spirit that connects all things to proclaim your love to friends and strangers through our words and in our actions. May we bring comfort, peace, joy, and hope into the world this Christmas.

**Eternal God may we prepare ourselves to proclaim the celebration of your love.**

In Jesus name, amen.

#### **Our offering to God.**

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

**Suggested Hymn** Joy to the world

Listen [here](#)

#### **Blessing**

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.